

One ECNCD Study Committee Member's Experience: Hidden Costs of Historic & NCDs 1

My name is Ron Creamer. I moved to Cambridge in the middle 80s and lived here for the next 27 years. I first came to know East Cambridge in 1992, when I purchased the commercial building at 501 Cambridge Street where I operated my printing company for the next 21 years. I sold the printing business 9 years ago, renovated the building, and now operate it as an office rental property.

Over my time here, I have developed a strong affection for East Cambridge's rich history and the wonderful and diverse group of people that live and work here. I was selected to serve as a Study Committee member on the ECNCD in my capacity as a commercial building owner.

Since the resumption of the ECNCD Study Committee proceedings in early 2021, I have been trying to get the opportunity to present my personal experiences with two Historic Committees in front of the ECNCD Study Committee. My belief was that by understanding the unintended consequences and true costs in play with NCDs and Historic Districts, we would be able to be mindful of the real world consequences of what we would eventually propose for East Cambridge. This knowledge, I believed, would serve to temper, not scuttle, our goals and to best balance practical neighborhood conservation with the rights, needs and interests of our community.

Since the resumption of the ECNCD Study Committee in January, some among the Study Committee and the CHC leadership have, to a large extent, marginalized my voice and demonstrated an overall intolerance and unwillingness to consider the input from others in the community with views they feared might conflict with those of their own. The Study has dragged on far longer than originally planned and the CHC led report is, but for a few minor details, already a foregone conclusion.

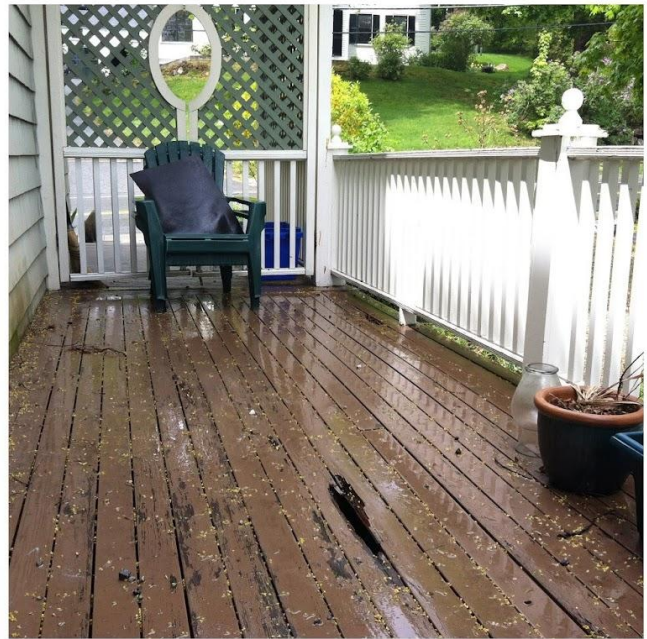
My biggest regret is that I did not fight harder to get the experiences outlined here in front of the committee and community sooner, when, in retrospect, it still could have made a difference.

Here, I finally outline my trials and tribulations with two different Historic Committees. I share these with the knowledge that many of the same dynamics at work in my experiences would most likely be present in future ECNCD proceedings. In truth, these dynamics are already in play.

I Belmont Historic District (2013 - 2019)



In 2012, my family and I fell in love with and purchased this 135 year-old modified Victorian near Belmont Center. It is situated in the middle of both a National Register District and the Town's Pleasant Street Historic District. The property was also notable for being the first of many projects of native Belmontonian architect E.B. Homer. Homer worked at the prestigious Hartwell and Richardson firm, was an MIT Professor of architecture, and in 1901 became the first Director of the Rhode Island School of Design.



The exterior needed a lot of work (see photos, above). Among other issues, the North-facing decks were rotting and the gravel driveway's drainage issues led to flooding and damage to the 100 year-old garage, which at one point was used to stable horses.

My wife and I loved the property and were excited to set about restoring and improving it but decided to simply live in it for a year or so to better understand what it might need.

In 2013, a year after we moved in, we approached the Belmont Historic for guidance. They were pleased with our interest in improving the property. They told us to start by betting a surveyor and an architect and prepare a detailed presentation to them at a future hearing.



Locating, hiring and obtaining a survey took some time. We then worked with our architect on our master plan. Finally, after 6 months of work, excited, we finished our 10 page presentation, printed and bound the 14 copies required by the Committee, and applied the 3 weeks in advance of the meeting, as was required. We attended the hearing with our architect and when we were called, our enthusiasm was short-lived. One of our new neighbors was in attendance and began to strenuously object to our project. As it turns out, this neighbor was a retired architect who also had served on the Belmont Historic District Committee himself. His objections seemed to carry a lot of weight with the committee. The head of the Historic Committee cut our presentation short and told us to "Make your neighbor happy". Our architect was stunned.

Not entirely understanding what had just happened, or what, if any recourse we would have, we left that hearing completely discouraged and felt we may have to give up on our renovation hopes entirely.

We have long since befriended the neighbor who objected to our project, and his wife. At a holiday party a few years ago, the wife apologized to us for the incident. She explained that her husband's motivation wasn't so much aimed at the merits of our project, but rather that he was still upset about an addition made to our house in the early 1990s (3 owners prior). "I never should have let her do it" he would repeatedly complain to his wife over the years.



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 BELMONT, MA 02478

TEL: 617-270-5655
 E-MAIL: rcream@ecncd.com
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Furnish and install one (1) 16 1/2 x 6 Custom Equustrain, Vertical 4" grooves, primed, 16 lite true divide, (as spec'd), 16" radius tracks opening system, fully weather stripped.
 Furnish and install one (1) 3/4 HP electric operator with two (2) remotes and one (1) wireless keypad.

Total Cost - \$6,150.00

- Electrical and/or framework not included unless otherwise specified.
- Add \$25.00 per minute for surge protectors.
- Customer is responsible for covering all finished flooring. Collins Door is not responsible for any damage to concrete floors.
- To ensure the highest level of safety, 10' of work area at the front of the garage should be cleared of personal property. Additional costs may be incurred if work area is not cleared.
- Custom arch weather-stripping (if required) is not included in total price.
- A \$250.00 delivery fee (per mile) if the customer requests delivery of doors to job location prior to installation.
- Wood door products should be finished, stained or painted according to manufacturer's instructions prior to installation to comply with the manufacturer's warranty.
- Flirt doors cannot be painted. This will void the warranty.
- Custom decorative hardware is not included.
- Collins Door is not responsible for non-photo eyed operators (UL325 regulations).
- Cancelled custom orders are subject to 10% cancellation fee.
- All new doors should be serviced at least once a year.
- Any liquid fees or out of pocket costs due to collection will be the responsibility of the customer.
- Balance to be paid by credit card, cash or check upon completion of work.
- Quotation valid for sixty (60) days.

Should you have any questions regarding this quotation, please do not hesitate to call.
 To accept quote, please return signed quotation with a 50% deposit. Thank you!
 EMAILED QUOTE

Kerry Collins, Sales Representative Acceptance of Proposal

ne kon
 A DIVISION OF
 COLLENS OVERHEAD DOOR

Agreed approval of this design is required prior to acceptance under any other terms. Approval must be obtained in writing from your local office. Please show dimensions clearly on drawings to confirm accuracy. All dimensions are subject to change without notice. Please refer to the local office's literature for more information. Obtain a permit and other approvals as required by your local jurisdiction. These are not manufacturer's obligations and will not be held under warranty.

COLLINS OVERHEAD DOOR
 Project: NOT PROVIDED

APPROVAL SIGNATURE

3 1/2" (1)
 4" HEMLOCK V-GROOVE SIG

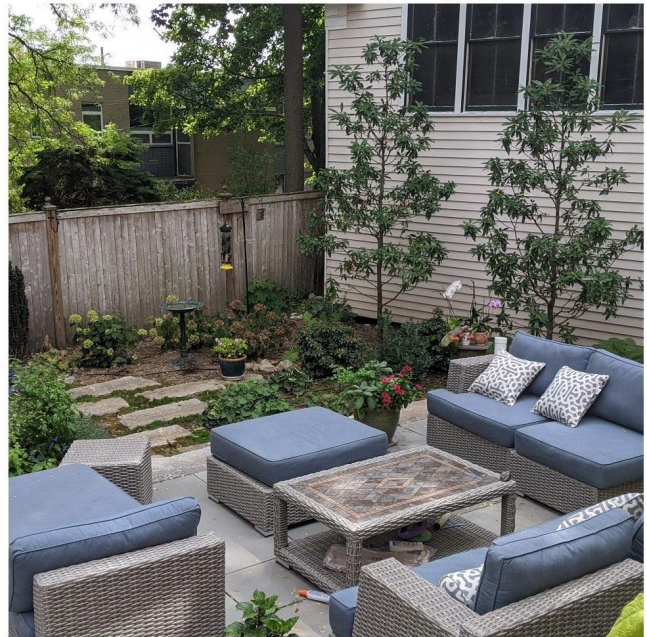
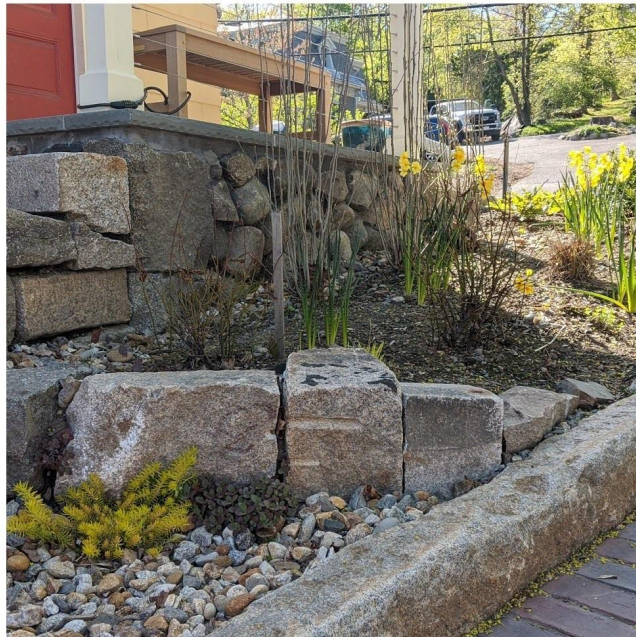
JEKTRIAN	Door Width (P1 W)	Door Height (P1 H)	No. Sections	No. Panels	Exterior Surface	Trim Overlay
IE TOP	16" OSB	7'-6"	4	4	4" T&G HEMLOCK	SMOOTH HEMLOCK
	Coating Type		Qty of Lites	Lite Color		Finishing (By Owner)
	16" OSB		16	TRUE CROSS DIVIDE		PAINT GRADE

Unsure at the time if or how we could make our neighbor happy, we decided to shelve our plans for the balance of the project and concentrate instead on getting the garage in workable shape as quickly as possible. The commission gave us helpful guidelines including the need to use copper 1/2 round gutters, historic shingles, paint scheme to be chosen from an approved palette from [Historic New England's "Historic Colors of America"](#), etc.

The sticking point regarded the replacement of the garage’s original barn doors. Due to the

drainage issue, the doors were rotted beyond repair. We sent a few proposed designs of standard prefabricated barn door style garage doors to Belmont Historic for consideration. The committee, then composed mostly of current and retired architects, had conflicting opinions and could not agree on an appropriate design. Instead they appointed a single committee member to work with us on a custom garage door in May of 2013. Our advisor, a retired architect himself, left for the Vineyard for the summer, did not use email, and wasn’t able to begin working with us until September. Communications were sporadic over the next 9 months while we went through multiple iterations of design changes. Each iteration required a new shop drawing and quote from the vendor and then evaluation and feedback from our advisor. In May of 2014 we received approval from Belmont Historic and we immediately placed our order — a full year after we had started.

While we are happy with the end result, It did take another three months to manufacture and ship. The door was finally installed in September of 2014 at the end of a 16 month process. Seven years ago, the door cost \$6,150 and did not include electrical, framing or paint. As a point of reference, the barn-style garage doors originally proposed to Belmont Historic had a maximum lead time of 30 days and were all priced around \$1,000. We also dealt with the extreme inconvenience of having to juggle parking for an additional 16 months without the use of our garage and driveway, which we share with our neighbors.



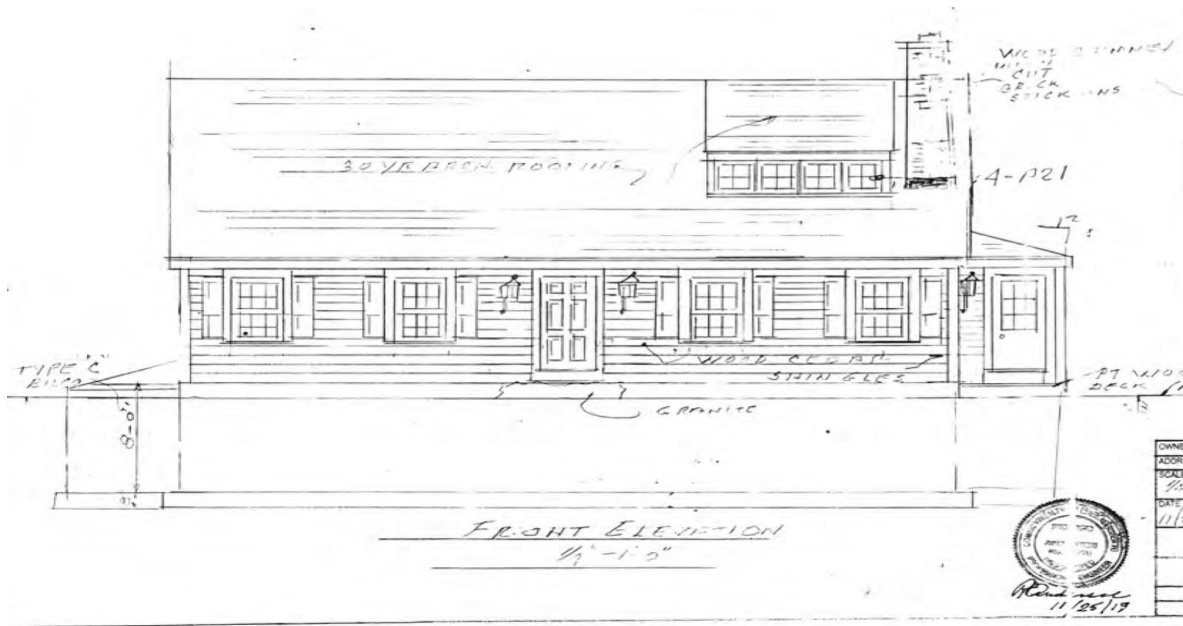
It would be several more years before we mustered up enough money and courage in late 2017 to mount another attempt at improving the exterior of the property. We worked with our neighbor. In fact we obtained support from all of our neighbors. We scaled back our plans for our deck. We repaved the entire gravel driveway in historic red brick pavers. We researched, selected and integrated historic reclaimed granite, originally mined in Gloucester and installed in Union Square over 100 years ago. It was far from easy — we braved the various opinions of the HDC members, who would, at times, castigate even their fellow HDC members in an architectural jargon that only they understood over what they felt was appropriate for our project. At the end of this 2 year project however, we, our neighbors, and even Belmont Historic, were all pleased with the result. The process however, was several orders of magnitude more painful, frustrating, time consuming and expensive than we ever thought possible.

II Dennis Historic



In July of 2019, a very rare tornado touched down in Barnstable county and sent part of a maple tree through the roof of my family's 900 sf summer cottage on Cape Cod. We compiled the long list of repairs and consulted with the Town Planner about other improvements we might be able to make. He explained that because the structure was built before modern zoning laws, building and fire codes, it was deemed a "non conforming structure" in nearly every way. Therefore, essentially we wouldn't be able to change anything at all. His advice, and that of our architect, was to knock it down and build a new, conforming house in the middle of the lot.

Not at all keen on taking that unexpected and expensive route and losing our beloved cottage, we were eventually forced to do so when a subsequent structural inspection revealed that the old rubble foundation was unsafe even to effect repairs. Despite our deep affection for the old cottage, we succumbed finally and committed ourselves to a knockdown and rebuild.



While not an historic house, the property does lie in the Dennis Old Kings Highway Historic District and this required us to first obtain a [“Demolition Permit”](#) from the Dennis Historic Commission ([per the Town’s demolition delay by-law](#)), a [“Certificate for Demolition”](#) from the Old King’s Highway Historic District Commission, and a [“Certificate of Appropriateness”](#) for the new house from the OKH Historic District.

Frank, our charming, nearly 90 year-old architect, who did all his drawings by hand, and had himself served on the Old Kings Highway Historic District Commission, assured us that he could usher us through the tedious 3 step process. Frank “knew what the commission wanted” and his advice was to propose a simple, modest and traditional Cape Cod style home, nothing more. “Think boring” Frank advised. (front elevation shown above for the proposed new structure)

My wife and I wanted to add a small walk-out, 6x10, faux widow’s walk-inspired balcony over the bump out/mudroom entrance on the far right, but Frank talked us out of it. While he liked the idea, he told us it was best to stick to the most simple and basic design, colors, door, window, roof, and other material selection that the commission was predisposed to approve. Frank’s advice was prescient, as we would later learn.

The January 2020 hearing was intense and we nearly lost the ability to replace a virtually condemned structure that we could not safely repair or improve. While the original house was deemed “not historic” and therefore not subject to the demolition delay by-law, the Historic Committee Chair opposed both the demolition permit and the certificate of appropriateness for reasons he did not articulate. Another resident, who I respect, had both lived in the house as a boy and also served on the Historic Commission previously. He also came out against the demolition. It looked as though we would be denied. In the end, we did prevail in a split vote and we finally obtained our building permit on the day that the Town’s offices closed for Covid-19 in March of 2020. Frank told me after the hearing that, during his tenure on the Historic Committee, he failed to get along with the Historic Chair. This, Frank believed, was the main reason behind the Chair’s unarticulated opposition to our applications.



NTS

Proposed change August 3rd, 2020

Replace roof above mudroom bumpout/side entrance with "Widow's Walk" type

Mid construction, in the summer of 2020, I looked out of the empty 2nd floor window-frame from what was to become my daughter's bedroom at the beautiful sunlight emanating from the South. (pictured to the left, top) Despite Frank's sage advice, I felt this window was once again begging instead to be a door leading to a small, sunny balcony. I called the Historic office that day about my proposed change and was pleased to learn that they had a far simpler, streamlined procedure for small changes like this called an "[Application to Amend](#)". Without our architect Frank, who had sadly passed, my wife did the attached rendering of what the proposed change would look like (pictured to the left, bottom). We submitted the rendering, along with the main form and material details and we were put on the agenda for the upcoming August Historic hearing.

This meeting was held by Zoom and when our application to amend came up, a certain Historic District Committee member inexplicably started to

strenuously object to the idea of the balcony. While no other members voiced any objections at all, this member went on to gesture forcibly on camera while describing how this huge balcony would loom over Main Street (property is not on Main Street, and the proposed balcony was only 6'x10' and 46' from our street), He went on to say there was no precedent, that it would not fit in with the neighborhood, and he objected to the materials chosen. No vote was ever taken — he alone insisted that our application to amend be denied. If we wanted to proceed, he decided, we would have to return at a later date and apply instead with a completely new, full application for an additional certificate of appropriateness, specific to the balcony.

My wife and I were once again stunned, disheartened and totally discouraged. That evening, we decided to give up on our idea for the balcony for our daughter's bedroom.



The following week, as I rode my bicycle to the beach I stopped to admire the real deal, a genuine historic widow's walk on an old sea captain's home (yellow house, above right). It's connection to history resonated with me. On my way back, I noticed several more second floor, walk-out, widow's walk inspired balconies. The next morning I set out by car to explore for more. Within 45 minutes, I had located and photographed dozens of them.

The inconsistencies and untruths shown toward our amendment application by the lone committee member really upset me. This motivated me to change course and submit to the lengthy process for a full application for a new certificate of appropriateness. This new application for the balcony was more detailed

than our original application for the entire house. We submitted 14 bound copies of our 26 page application, replete with survey, existing photos, prior elevations, proposed elevations, material & color details, letters of support from neighbors and abutters, and over 20 photos of similar, 2nd story, widow's walk-inspired walk out balconies approved by the same Historic District employing the exact same materials we proposed, most of which were of much larger scale and far closer to the street than ours. It required a lot of work, but our application thoroughly disproved all of the objecting committee member's prior objections, one by one.

When the hearing date finally arrived, we quickly prevailed by a vote of 4-1. The lone dissenter was again the same committee member who had single-handedly denied our amendment application a month prior. While I could never quite figure out why he distorted the facts and precedents regarding our balcony, I heard through the grapevine that this member was close friends with an influential local resident known for her cranberry business who was quite vocal and upset upon hearing of the demolition of our old cottage. Coincidentally, the two of them did in fact serve prominently together in a separate, local historical society. While I still find this explanation quite hard to believe, it is the only account I have heard that comes close to explaining the vehemence and personal nature of his opposition to our balcony despite all the facts to the contrary.

We'll never know his true motivations, but that the balcony came at an enormous price. We spent countless hours preparing for the hearings. We were so discouraged, we very nearly gave up. We lost 2 months to the historic process and during that time, my builder, understandably, could not wait around for a resolution and moved on to another project. In all, there was a 5 month delay in construction time. When we returned, building material costs had since skyrocketed and scarcities compounded the delays. My family's eventual enjoyment and use of the property would be delayed by nearly half a year.

Lessons For a Possible ECNCD

What do my two journeys have to do with a possible future ECNCD? Everything, I think. Are my experiences simply outliers? Am I the unluckiest person in the world regarding engagements with Historic Districts? It would be reckless and irresponsible to assume so. Moreover, as hinted in my introduction, a lot of these dynamics are already in play here, and have been steadily increasing in intensity since the ECNCD was first conceived.

While I acknowledge we are proposing a Neighborhood Conservation District as opposed to an Historic District, Cambridge Historic has admitted in our study committee hearings that they are essentially the same animal and share most of the same dynamics. Let's please not kid ourselves otherwise.

The amount of time, effort and expense that goes into preparation for these historic/NCD hearings is often extensive. Surveyors, architects, and sometimes attorneys are often engaged and will accompany timid applicants to the proceedings. Preparations, deliberations & committee decisions and recommendations take time and considerable expense. Resulting custom construction work is by definition more expensive and can often lead to manufacturing and delivery delays. These delays are further compounded with installation delays waiting for busy contractors to return. This is the very nature of the beast. The delays compound and add up quickly. Regardless of the obvious financial cost, even in the best of cases, they all lead to deferred or lost enjoyment of the proposed improvements by the applicants — once again a broadening of the term “cost”.

The process, from an applicant's perspective, while hopefully rewarding, is often daunting, intimidating, nerve-wracking and downright discouraging. Your neighbors, for example, may have the power to scuttle your plans based on their personal subjective tastes, or their own past experiences or prejudices. There may be history between commission members themselves (past or present), and or with you or your representatives, friends, and their personal opinions or attachment to your property, or experiences with previous owners of your property. Despite the “guidelines” for an NCD, one can't possibly know where all the possible permutations of landmines are buried. As we've learned in our proceedings here in East Cambridge, It's indeed a small world, after all.

Many take a look at the process and simply give up, sometimes even deferring needed repairs and upkeep. This represents another serious yet hidden cost to our community.

Others are asked to reduce, compromise, or at times completely sacrifice their project's creativity or vision — their dreams essentially for their own property — to limit unwanted delays and potential conflict in obtaining approval. This squelching of creativity is yet another significant cost, one never adequately understood, addressed or even considered by our committee. Both the owners and the community at large suffer this loss of creativity together.

Then there is the question of owner and property rights. This is the proverbial 3rd rail, or the elephant in the room that the ECNCD SC dare not touch. Do property owners have any? Or should they all simply submit their trust to the whims, wishes and moods of our unelected study committee and future commission members?

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The guidelines we prepare are just that, guidelines. As I have painfully experienced, what happens in the trenches often strays far away from the published guidelines. While we'd all likely feel much more comfortable with an ECNCD staffed and operated by the likes of Charlie and Eric, that isn't how these things work. A future ECNCD would be staffed by volunteers from the community, just like Historic Districts are. Volunteerism is currently at an all-time low. You may have read or heard of Cambridge's recent difficulties in their push to fill the many vacancies in the Mid Cambridge, Avon Hill and Half Crown-Marsh NCDs.

Most of these positions will hopefully be filled by well intentioned people from our communities. People who will be generously volunteering their time and with sincere hopes and intentions to do well and to uphold the goals outlined for them. However, as we all know, and as Charlie has told us, committee members are human and even our own existing NCDs have gone astray and needed to be reigned back in by the CHC. We all have good days and bad ones. Sometimes we disagree with our peers and our own past experiences and prejudices can cloud our present judgements. We have already seen the seeds sown here during our two years of contentious deliberations. We come in, all of us, with our own histories with others and our opinions and preferences. This, unfortunately, can result in inconsistencies, over-reaches, misunderstandings, biases and may lead to severe unintended consequences which include stress, lost time, money, deferred/lost enjoyment, the suppression of creativity and yes, unnecessarily dashed dreams for what you want your own property to be like.

While I am no expert on the possible effects a NCD has on housing or rental prices, make no mistake about it, it clearly won't make housing cheaper, and the implementation of an NCD will result in serious hidden costs to both property owners and our community at large.

At a hearing a few months ago, Charlie brought up the thought of limiting and scaling back the scope of the ECNCD so as to not "unnecessarily burden" those in our community who don't own historic properties or who own properties not subject to the goals identified and targeted by the ECNCD. The study committee quickly dismissed the idea as being too complicated to tackle this at that late stage in the process. It was much easier, it was implied, to simply leave all that unnecessary burden in the plan.

Sadly, in hindsight, the study committee nailed it that evening. It is indeed far too late in the process to get this soon-to-be-approved ECNCD right.



Ron Creamer
East Cambridge Neighborhood Conservation District Study Commission Member